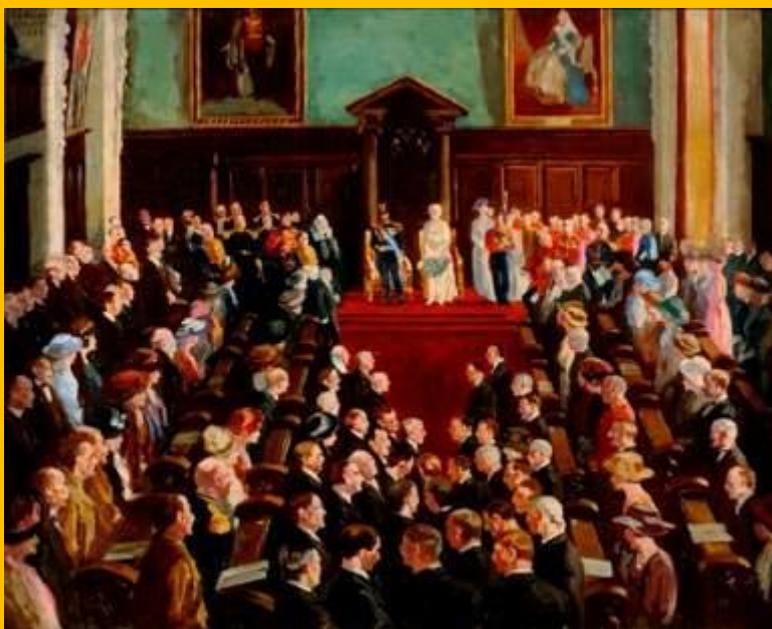


# A Cynical Centenary: Northern Ireland 1921-2021

*“It would be rather interesting for historians of the future to compare a Catholic State launched in the South with a Protestant State launched in the North and see which gets on the better and prospers the more”- Lord Brookeborough, 1921- Prime Minister of Northern Ireland 1921-40.*



*Opening of NI Parliament in 1921 by British Monarch*

In 2016, unionist members of Belfast City Council threatened to boycott a 1916 commemorative dinner hosted by President Michael D Higgins, resulting in its cancellation. Political unionism in the form of the DUP now feigns indignation that the nationalist population of the North of Ireland do not wish to commemorate the centenary of the statelet that humiliated, imprisoned, terrorised, murdered and discriminated against them.

The birth of the Northern Ireland statelet was a bloody affair, with 557 people being killed between 1920 and '22, 498 of them in sectarian pogroms in Belfast. The majority of those killed were Catholics, although only a third of the population of the North was Catholic. Many of the most shocking murders, like that of the McMahan family, were carried out by a loyalist death squad inside the police led by District Inspector John William Nixon. More than 10,000 Catholics were driven out of their jobs and 23,000 were forced out of their homes.<sup>1</sup> This process of expulsion was to continue over the following decades. Mike Tomlinson of Queen's University estimated in 1993 that, between 1920 and 1968, 263,000 Catholics were forced to leave Northern Ireland.

Northern unionists set about building an “Orange State”, in the process creating an armed and 90% Protestant, police force (RUC) and 100% Protestant auxiliary B Specials in 1922. Police membership of the Orange Order was permitted. The northern statelet also passed the Special Powers Act in 1922, which allowed for execution, whipping, internment and the searching of buildings, vehicles and persons without warrant. For Nationalists, the north was becoming an authoritarian statelet, as Prime Minister Craig said in 1934: “We have the Orange Order, the Black Brethren and the B Specials and they constitute all the fascism that Ulster needs.”

Nationalist-controlled councils in the west were dissolved, PR-STV in local elections was abolished in 1922, and for Stormont Elections in 1928. Majority nationalist constituencies like Derry City were

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<sup>1</sup> *UVF*, Jim Cusack & Henry Mc Donald, pp 60-63

gerrymandered in such a way that the 40% Protestant population elected 12 councillors while the 60% Catholic population only elected 8.<sup>2</sup> Nationalists boycotted the northern Parliament until 1927 when it became clear that the 1925 boundary commission would make no change to their lives. In Stormont, they formed a permanent minority and only succeeded in passing one bill on wild birds in 50 years.

Catholics were discriminated against in employment and housing. From 1927 to 1959, 94% of higher civil servants were Protestant<sup>3</sup>. Local government was no better - in 1957, 60 out of 66 Administrative officers in Tyrone County Council were Protestant, despite the County having a 55.3% Catholic majority.<sup>4</sup> This exclusion of Catholics from senior positions was in stark contrast to the South. There, although Protestants accounted for only 7.6% of the population in 1926, they accounted for 53% of bankers, 38% of lawyers and 26% of farmers with more than 200 acres. Encouragement of sectarian discrimination came from the top. In March 1934, the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Basil Brooke, advised: "I recommend those people who are loyalists not to employ Roman Catholics, 99% of whom are disloyal".<sup>5</sup> The purpose of this discrimination, gerrymandering and sectarian violence was to ensure that nationalists never became a majority in the northern statelet. A loyalist paramilitary group, the Ulster Protestant Association, led sectarian riots against Catholics in 1931 in Armagh, Lisburn, Portadown and Belfast; an AOH St Patrick's day parade was attacked in March 1932; there were further attacks that June and July on Catholics returning from the eucharistic congress in Dublin. In November 1933, a Catholic publican was shot dead in Yorke St Belfast and sectarian attacks escalated in 1934, culminating in the silver jubilee of King George V in May 1935 when sectarian rioting in Belfast resulted in 13 deaths and British troops being called onto the streets.<sup>6</sup>

From its creation, Northern Ireland was an economic basket case; it was never able to pay for itself and, time and again, was forced to bring the begging bowl to the British Treasury for ever-increasing subventions. Unemployment was always a serious problem, ranging from 15% in 1928 to 28.3% in 1938 with a usual average of about 20%. However, due to sectarian discrimination the pain fell disproportionately on Catholics. Only primitive social welfare existed and, unlike the south, the humiliating work-house survived in the north until 1948. In 1938, the infant mortality rate, at 76 per 1000, was much higher than in the south. In 1938, 36% of people in Belfast lived in absolute poverty, while 87% of rural houses in 1939 had no running water. In 1938, 46% of those who died between 15 and 25 years old perished due to TB. Very little public housing was built, Fermanagh council did not build a single cottage up to 1939 and what was built was sub-standard and was subject to sectarian discrimination in its allocation.

Economically World War Two was a God-send for Northern Ireland, Unemployment fell to 5% and demand for labour, and for agricultural and manufactured goods, rocketed, which increased wages and profits. German air raids on Belfast on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1941 led to the deaths of over 1100 people and another 100,000 being made homeless. The incompetence of the unionist government's civil defence preparations contributed to the people's suffering. World War Two saw the renewal of a minor IRA campaign in the north. In April 1942, an IRA ambush in Belfast resulted in the death of one RUC man and Northern Ireland's only execution of an IRA member, 19 year old Tom Williams.<sup>7</sup>

After the war, the British government introduced the welfare state, which was paid for by the British Treasury. A widening economic gap opened up north and south. Although there were considerable improvements in education, health, social welfare, housing and employment, sectarian discrimination

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<sup>2</sup> *Northern Ireland, between Civil rights and Civil War*, Liam O Dowd, Bill Rolston & Mike Tomlinson, p 126.

<sup>3</sup> *Modern Ireland*, Mark Tierney, 1972. p 212.

<sup>4</sup> *War and an Irish Town*, Eamonn McCann, p 188.

<sup>5</sup> *Modern Ireland*, p 207.

<sup>6</sup> *UVF*, pp 65-6; *Modern Ireland*, p 393.

<sup>7</sup> *Ireland During the Second World War*, Ian S Wood, pp 143 & 149.

and harassment continued, including the passing of the Flags and Emblems Act of 1954 that prohibited the flying of the tricolour. Such humiliations led to renewed republican attacks, known as the 'border campaign', from 1956 to 1962, which cost the north £11million in extra security as well as the lives of 19 people ,including 6 RUC and 11 republicans and the internment without trial of 335 nationalists.<sup>8</sup>

The frustrations of the nationalist population with relentless sectarian discrimination, repression, harassment, humiliation and poverty led to seeking redress by demanding equality through the civil rights movement of the late 1960s. Even up to the late 1960s, Derry's Guildhall never employed a single Catholic. When the Civil Rights Movement was beaten off the streets by the British state, it led to an explosion of rage, which resulted in a nigh-on 30-year campaign of resistance and intensified repression during which the Stormont Parliament fell in 1972 after 50 years of misrule.

This conflict fermented an enduring legacy of sectarian hatred and distrust and unleashed a whirlwind of violence. It led to the militarisation of society with the deployment of British troops on the streets of the north for the next three decades, reaching a peak 17,183 in 1973. The total number of 'security forces' peaked at 35,599 in 1978. Between 1970 and 1987, 332,657 houses were searched. The conflict led to the deaths of 3750 people from 1966 to 2014. In addition, 47,541 people were injured and 19,606 were imprisoned. Between 1971 and 1975, 2060 republicans and 109 loyalists were interned without trial.<sup>9</sup> The European Court of Human Rights found Britain guilty of “inhuman and degrading treatment” of some nationalist internees. Many others had confessions beaten out of them by police in the north, the south and in Britain, resulting in miscarriages of justice such as the Birmingham six and Gilford four. On top of this, the nationalist community had to endure a diet from the media of lies, propaganda and censorship, which sought to dehumanise them and discredit their views. Daily life for nationalists became a nightmare of CS gas, rubber bullets, checkpoints, searches, watchtowers, electronic surveillance, informers and spies. Juries were replaced by one-judge Diplock courts, which frequently ignored or covered up security force killings such as in the 4-year long Stalker/Sampson inquiry, which has never been published or the Stevens inquiry, where only 19 of its 3000 pages have been made public. Collusion with Loyalist murder gangs leading to the random murder of hundreds of Catholics became an indispensable tool of British State policy. The conflict to a large extent also reduced the north to an economic wasteland with unemployment reaching 19.7% in January 1982<sup>10</sup>.

This century-long legacy of injustice, which still has not been righted, is what the nationalist population of Northern Ireland are expected to celebrate!

When accepting his Nobel peace prize, former Ulster Unionist leader, David Trimble fleetingly referred to Northern Ireland as “a cold house for nationalists”. As must be obvious from the above brief outline of Northern Ireland's history, this must surely be the understatement of the century.

*Paul McGuill, Cathaoirleach CNÉ-INC, 16 Dec 2020*

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<sup>8</sup> *Makers of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland*, A M Kehoe, pp 146-7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, page 94.

<sup>10</sup> *Northern Ireland - A Chronology of the Troubles 1968-93*, Bew & Gillespie, p 160.